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In pursuit of evidence-based policy and practice: A realist synthesis-inspired examination of youth sport and physical activity initiatives in England (2002-2010)

Abstract

During the period from 2002 to 2010, the significance of youth sport to the Labour government in England led to substantial funding for initiatives aimed at increasing young people's participation in sport and physical activity. In keeping with the government's rhetoric of evidence-based policy, a plethora of different research reports on specific youth sport initiatives were commissioned. The purpose of this study was to synthesise relevant reports to better understand the implementation of Labour's youth sport policies and to consider the extent to which insights drawn from these reports could extend understanding of effective approaches to improving young people's participation in sport and physical activity. Inspired by a 'realist synthesis' approach, the research methodology focused attention towards the mechanisms, contexts and outcomes of youth sport initiatives. An iterative six stage approach guided the identification and analysis of 13 research reports and enabled refinement of an initial programme theory that, drawn from governmental policy, encompassed mechanisms associated with management, use of resources and the provision of activities. In practice, approaches to addressing long-recognised problems in the supply of youth sport opportunities were supported by the scale of nationally provided financial resources and were reported to have some positive impact on

participation. However, there were also indications that longstanding inequalities in participation remained resistant to change and this potentially reflected the lack of innovation in youth sport initiatives. Similarly, it is concluded that the politically constrained focus of the research reports limited their potential to contribute to evidence-based policy.

Key Words

Evaluation, Implementation, School sport, Labour government,
Modernisation

Introduction

The potential utilisation of evidence to inform public policy has been increasingly debated since the 1980s but gained particular political traction in England during the period of the Labour government from 1997 to 2010 (Greener and Greve, 2013). Labour's 'pragmatic, anti-ideological' (Pawson, 2006a, p2) commitment to evidence-based policy sat comfortably within its wider rhetoric concerning the modernisation of public services. Two main strands of this evidence-based policy agenda can be identified (Sanderson, 2002). The first was concerned with promoting accountability through examining the effectiveness of policies and programmes. Articulated in Labour's language of 'what matters is what works', the second identifiable strand was associated with improvement in policy and practice through examination of evidence on previous interventions (Sanderson, 2002). This focus on improvement is the central concern of this article which considers evidence from youth sport and physical activity initiatives in England through the period of the Labour government.

In historical comparison, sport was subject to a high level of governmental interest and intervention during the period of the Labour government. This governmental interest can, at least large part, be attributed to the belief of prominent Labour politicians, from the Prime Minister downwards, that sport could contribute to their wider policy agendas (Houlihan and Lindsey, 2013). In particular, concerns about levels of physical inactivity amongst young people, associations with the obesity epidemic and perceptions of

deteriorating provision of opportunities for young people in PE and school sport contributed to the specific prioritisation of increasing young people's participation in sport and physical activity (DCMS, 2000; Bailey, 2005; Houlihan and Green, 2006; Bloyce and Smith, 2009). As a result, there was an unprecedented commitment of £2.2 billion of funding for PE and sport for young people over the nine years from 2002 to 2011 (DCMS, 2008). Much of this funding was distributed through a range of specific initiatives, such as School Sport Partnerships and the New Opportunities for PE and Sport programme, that collectively composed the PE, School Sport and Club Links strategyⁱ (DfES / DCMS, 2003). Many of these initiatives were focused on, and provided funding through, schools although increasing young people's participation in community locations was also prioritised both in government policies and in other initiatives funded by organisations such as Sport England (DCMS / Strategy Unit, 2002). Across these youth sport initiatives collectively and individually, a core focus on increasing overall levels of participation in sport and physical activity amongst young people was commonly balanced with more nebulous aspirations to address wider social objectives of the Labour government.

Given the relatively high salience of youth sport, it was unsurprising that aspects of Labour's modernisation agenda were closely integrated into the design of particular initiatives and wider youth sport policy. The governance of initiatives was commonly instituted through new or reformed partnership structures (Houlihan & Lindsey, 2013). Government funding was commonly accompanied by particular targets, most notably those for increasing the

proportion of pupils participating in PE and school sport on a weekly basis (Smith & Leech, 2011). Moreover, in line with the rhetoric of evidence-based policy, there was increased emphasis on the assessment, monitoring and evaluation of youth sport initiatives funded by the government and managed by national agencies, such as the Youth Sport Trust (Coalter, 2011).

Research organisations such as the Institute of Youth Sport (IYS), Sport Industry Research Centre (SIRC), state agencies such as OFSTED and commercial companies were directed and commissioned to undertake research, monitor and evaluate particular initiatives. These investigations were suggested as often having the dual purpose of both assessing the outcomes and examining the implementation of these initiatives (Houlihan, 2011). By the end of the period of Labour government, there was an abundance of publically available research reportsⁱⁱ on specific youth sport initiatives.

Potentially, these research reports represent a largely untapped source of knowledge regarding policy and practice aimed at increasing young people's participation in sport and physical activity. Despite youth sport being a prominent concern and the involvement of academic institutions in a number of the evaluations, there remain relatively few academic publications that consider the local implementation of national initiatives that were designed to increase participation during the period of the Labour government (for exceptions see Flintoff, 2003, 2008; Waring and Mason, 2010). Previous systematic reviews have also identified that there remain gaps in knowledge on effective approaches to increasing young people's participation in sport

and physical activity (Timperio *et al.* 2004; Foster *et al.*, 2005). However, Weed (2005) argues that approaches to synthesising disparate empirical studies have been relatively underemployed in respect of sport and may be of value in bringing new insights. Applying research synthesis methodologies to multiple youth sport research reports may help to overcome the 'dubious generalisability' of such reports when each is considered in isolation (Houlihan, 2011, p577). Therefore, the synthesis presented in this article was undertaken in order to achieve two aims. The first aim was to gain a greater appreciation of the implementation of youth sport policy during the period of the Labour government, in order to contribute to addressing the limitations of the existing literature on this issue. The second aim of the synthesis was to consider the extent to which insights (drawn from synthesis of research reports) extend understanding of effective approaches to improving young people's participation in sport and physical activity. The importance of this particular aim derives both from the emphasis placed on evidence-based policy by the Labour government as well as emergent critiques regarding the methodological rigour of some approaches to monitoring and evaluation in practice (Smith and Leech 2010). The methodological approach of realist synthesis that has been developed across a number of publications by Ray Pawson and colleagues was adopted to achieve these aims. Both the rationale for, and the implementation of, this approach will be explained further in the following section.

Realist Synthesis Methodology and Methods

Closely aligned with the aims of this study, the primary ambition of realist synthesis is to build explanations of how and why programmes may work, to what extent, in what circumstances and for whom (Pawson, 2006a; Pawson and Bellamy 2006; Wong *et al.*, 2011; Pawson and Manzano-Santaella 2012). This multi-faceted purpose is contrasted with other established approaches to research synthesis, such as meta-analysis which Pawson (2002) demonstrates is largely limited to considering the effects of interventions. In response to debates regarding the precise characteristics and boundaries of a realist synthesis approach (Wong *et al.* 2011), Pawson has emphasised the flexibility of the approach, indicating that ‘the immediate priorities of empirical research are to respond to the research brief, to deal with the given substantive issue, and to contribute to policy development – rather than to aim for methodological purity’ (Pawson and Manzano-Santaella 2012, p198). In this regard, approaches that have taken an adapted approach (e.g. Rycroft-Malone *et al.* 2012) have been endorsed in articles co-authored by Pawson (Wong *et al.* 2011). However, it is in acknowledgement both of the sensitivities of the debates summarised here and some of the flexibilities in methodological implementation that this study is referred to as being ‘inspired’ by realist synthesis.

Nevertheless, in navigating this somewhat contentious methodological terrain, the study satisfied three key elements (Pawson, personal communication, 25 Sept 2014) that delimit realist synthesis. The first of these elements is the examination of causality through identification of ‘context,

mechanism, outcome configurations' (CMOs, Pawson 2002). It is with respect to such CMOs that the methodological approach is positioned as, philosophically, realist. Contexts refer to the environment in which a programme is delivered and pre-existing characteristics of intended beneficiaries (Pawson 2002, 2006a). Mechanisms, operating in association with various contextual conditions, are the causal 'triggers [of] different reactions amongst participants' (Pawson and Manzano-Santaella 2012, p184). In respect of mechanisms, Pawson *et al.* (2005, p22 as well as Wong *et al.* 2011) emphasise that realist synthesis seeks 'explanation in terms of the reasoning and personal choices of different actors and participants' in response to the various resources and tools enacted in the implementation of programmes. Both intended and unintended outcomes represent the consequences of interactions of contexts and mechanisms thus described (Hunter *et al.*, 2012).

The second key element of realist synthesis relates to the exploration of 'programme theories'. At the outset, a programme theory brings to the fore the 'underlying assumptions about how an intervention is meant to work and what impacts it is expected to have', in terms of relationships between and within CMOs (Pawson 2005, p21). It is through identifying, developing and continually refining our understanding of such programme theories that realist synthesis progresses towards identifying how and why programmes work through the use of mechanisms in particular contexts (Pawson, 2006a). It is this ongoing iterative modification and refinement of programme theories that represents the third key distinguishing element of realist synthesis. In

this regard, Pawson (2006a) emphasises not only the iterative but also the non-linear order in which the ‘tasks’ of a realist synthesis are undertaken. For example, realist synthesis involves the linked and concomitant appraisal and analysis of evidence garnered from relevant sources (Pawson *et al.* 2005; Pawson 2006b). In comparison to other synthesis methods which tend to separate appraisal and analysis into separate sequential stages, it is this aspect of realist synthesis approach which made it more relevant to achieving the dual aims of this study. Similarly, in studying ‘volunteer sports coaches as community assets’, Griffiths and Armour (2013, p1) utilise realist synthesis to both glean learning from, and appraise the limitations of, relevant literature.

Given the noted complexity and flexibility of realist synthesis, as well as its reliance on researchers’ judgement throughout the process, Pawson (2006a) identifies the need for transparency in explanations of the way in which a realist synthesis approach is implemented in particular studies. This requirement is addressed in the remainder of this section in which, constrained by the length of the articleⁱⁱⁱ, detailed explanation of the methods of this study will follow Pawson’s (2006a) overall presentational technique of considering each of six stages in turn. Description of the various overlaps, iterations and circularities of the methods as undertaken will be integrated into this structure as will be recognition of the limitations of this implementation of the realist synthesis-inspired approach.

Stage 1 – Identifying the review questions

Key tasks to be commenced at the outset of realist synthesis comprise of preliminary 'mapping' the topic area to be reviewed, 'prioritizing review questions' and developing an initial programme theory to underpin subsequent aspects of the review (Pawson, 2006a, p83). These tasks were undertaken through reviewing government documentation, previous analyses of government policy and other literature related to youth sport and physical activity participation. Given the salience of youth sport, the level of national direction and limitations of existing understanding of policy implementation (Houlihan and Lindsey, 2013), the approach to synthesis of 'compar[ing] official expectations with actual practice' (Pawson, 2006a, p95) was determined. This purpose gave rise both to the initial review aims and an exposition of the overarching programme theory underpinning government intervention in youth sport. Each of these aspects have already broadly explained in the introduction to this article with the programme theory further clarified in Figure 1. The relationships between the initial programme theory, and existing literature on youth sport were considered on an ongoing basis as the research was undertaken and, therefore, will be explained further throughout subsequent sections in which the review findings are presented.

Figure 1 around here

Stage 2 – Searching for primary studies

A key purpose at this stage is to identify primary studies that support the 'interrogation' of the identified programme theory (Pawson, 2006a, p84). As such, searching was limited to publically available reports on initiatives that

were instigated and funded by central government or other national public sector bodies during the Labour period of governance. While constraining the identification of primary studies in this way could be considered to limit this study, it reflects the aims of the study to examine the implementation of initiatives during this specific period and appraise the value of these particular research reports. A variety of search approaches were undertaken (Weed, 2005) including gaining reports from the websites of both national sport organisations, such as Sport England, and agencies undertaking funded research into sport and physical activity initiatives, such as OFSTED and the Institute of Youth Sport. Other research reports were identified via the authors' own knowledge of the subject area and through references in academic publications. As a result, an initial sample of 64 documents were identified which included evaluation reports for specific initiatives, regulatory inspection reports and other 'grey' research reports. The iterative and non-linear nature of the realist synthesis process was evident during the search: as reports were identified it was clear that some were more aligned with the achievement of wider social outcomes, such as crime reduction through sport (e.g. Substance / Catch 22, 2008) while others had a greater focus on participation. Therefore, the decision to focus the research aims and associated programme theory solely on the examination of participation in youth sport emerged from the process of initial identification of research reports.

Stage 3 – Quality appraisal

Alongside the search for primary studies, it was imperative to establish more rigorous inclusion criteria that the research reports had to satisfy in order that they be included in the study. Pawson (2006a) recognises that the process of quality appraisal in realist synthesis is significantly different from that in more positivist approaches to research synthesis. Empirical research may not have been undertaken to examine a particular programme theory or necessarily be of the highest methodological rigour (Pawson, 2006a). Nevertheless, those reports that solely reported on secondary data were discarded at this stage and only those that were considered credible (Scott, 1990), through the demonstration of an identifiable methodology, included. It was also apparent in initial appraisals that many research reports were limited in the extent they reported on data from young people that could help identify their responses to mechanisms and, in turn, examination of linkages between mechanisms, contexts and outcomes was constrained. As a result, the focus of the study tended towards refining the programme theory 'to explain, at a somewhat more general level [of implementation], the pattern of contexts, mechanisms and outcomes', an aim to which realist synthesis can valuably be orientated (Wong *et al.* 2011, p. 10). Importantly, following Pawson (2006a), this overall exploratory aim of understanding the implementation of youth sport initiatives guided further decisions on the inclusion of reports based on the value of specific extracts of evidence included within them. As a result, multiple reports on the same initiative based on different research were included for ongoing analysis although only the most recent report was included in other cases where there were multiple, chronological reports based on the same, ongoing research.

Stage 4 – Extracting the data

The processes of quality appraisal narrowed down extensive interrogation to a total of 13 research reports. As should be clear, this previous stage of involved significant analysis of the research reports and, as such, overlapped significantly with the processes of data extraction. Through multiple examinations of these reports, annotation of specific extracts of primary evidence referring to aspects of implementation mechanisms, context and outcomes was followed by collation of these extracts for each particular report (Pawson, 2006a). As previously indicated, Pawson (2006a, p93) also emphasises reportage of ‘the different ways in which studies have been used’ at this stage in order to demonstrate the transparency of the synthesis. For this reason, Table 1 outlines both the nature of the initiatives considered in the synthesis, the evidence that was extracted from each of the 13 reports and, where relevant to the second research aim, the limits of this evidence.

Table 1 about here

Stage 5 – Synthesising the data

The process of synthesising the evidence from different research reports was one of ‘careful abstraction’ centred on refining the initial programme theory (Pawson, 2006a). As shown in Table 1, evidence from individual reports was used to understand and refine specific elements, rather than offering a complete appraisal, of the initial programme theory (Pawson, 2006a, p96).

For example, research reports were used to consider the specific utilisation of both capital (e.g. Loughborough Partnership, 2009) and revenue funding (e.g. SIRC, 2011). Patterns of evidence regarding the outcomes and particular beneficiaries across initiatives were identified (Wong *et al.* 2013). Moreover, where noted in research reports, implementation issues in different school, community and geographical contexts were integrated into the refinement of the programme theory. Throughout this process of synthesis, both complementary and contradictory evidence was valued given the recognition that implementation processes do not necessarily follow governmental policy from which the initial programme theory had been derived (O’Gorman, 2011).

Stage 6 – Disseminating the findings

Green *et al.* (2007) identify the importance of providing a coherent account of findings based on both the approach to, and results of undertaking, analysis and synthesis. The components of realist causal explanation guided this analysis and synthesis and, as such, the themed findings associated with the developing programme theory are presented below in sections according to ‘mechanisms and contexts for improving participation’ and ‘the contribution of initiatives to achieving outcomes’ respectively. In doing so, and reflecting previous stages of the research synthesis, consideration is given to the value of the evidence that could be drawn from the research reports. Moreover, in line with Pawson (2006a), it is recognised that the causal explanations

identified are necessarily incomplete and attention is drawn to such limitations.

Mechanisms and Contexts for Improving Participation

'Modernised' Management of Youth Sport and Physical Activity Initiatives

Corresponding to the initially identified programme theory, partnership working as well as targets, monitoring and evaluation were common themes in the large proportion of research reports that considered management issues in relation to specific initiatives. In terms of partnerships, a number of reports evidenced the development of links between organisations either quantitatively (Loughborough Partnership, 2009; TNS-BMRB, 2010) or, more commonly, qualitatively. Largely descriptive accounts of such links were representative of different contexts for youth sport participation and included partnerships between primary and secondary schools (OFSTED, 2004; Loughborough Partnership, 2006), schools and community sports clubs (OFSTED, 2006; Loughborough Partnership, 2006; Sport England, 2008), schools and local authority sports development services (OFSTED, 2005; Loughborough Partnership, 2006); and, in one report, sports development organisations with other service areas and private sector organisations (SIRC, 2011).

The presentation of new or existing partnerships as a positive outcome in its own right in some of the research reports indicated a somewhat uncritical

acceptance of the underlying governmental programme theory. It was notable that one report was explicit in identifying partnerships as a 'critical success factor' even prior to commencement of data collection. From evaluation of School Sport Partnerships (Loughborough Partnership, 2006) there was a similar 'general agreement that improved links between schools is one of the key benefits' of involvement in the programme. Across other reports, a wide range of consequences of improved partnership working were identified including strategic planning (OFSTED, 2004), accessing financial and human resources (Loughborough Partnership, 2009; SIRC, 2011), information gathering and sharing (Knight *et al.*, 2005; OFSTED, 2006; 2009), supporting pupils' transition from primary to secondary school sport (OFSTED, 2009) and the provision of a wider range of sporting opportunities (OFSTED, 2009; SIRC, 2011). These partnership consequences can themselves be seen as further programme mechanisms, although only in regard of the latter two consequences would it be possible to make any plausible inferences regarding the potential contributions of partnerships to increasing participation. Moreover, the diversity of, or lack of commonality between, the reported consequences of partnership working limited the extent to which these findings led to significant refinement of the initial programme theory.

In terms of target setting, the research reports mainly referred to those targets that were determined at a national level and were directed towards public sector organisations, such as schools and County Sport Partnerships. Only in the Active England programme was it reported that there was some

constrained freedom for local stakeholders to choose targets from a list of prescribed performance indicators (Hall Aitken, 2009). The evidence was mixed as to the extent to which national targets were a mechanism that influenced management of youth sport initiatives. For example, on the one hand, the SIRC (2011, p89) reported 'targets were ambitious and this was felt to generate a keen sense of purpose in CSPs, particularly when finances were attached to the achievement of targets'. On the other, as Smith and Leech (2011) also indicate, national targets may not uniformly have had the influence on practice expected of them, especially where they were not fully understood by local stakeholders. In a judgement that suggested researchers' support for, but practical weaknesses of, the governmental approach to nationally-determined targets, OFTED (2009, p29) stated that within a 'minority of schools' the lack of awareness of ten nationally-determined outcomes of quality PE resulted in the 'missing [of] an opportunity to support improved standards'.

Similar to other aspects of the initial programme theory, monitoring and evaluation was ascribed significant importance in research reports. This importance was exemplified by the statement that a purpose of the national Sport Unlimited evaluation was to 'demonstrate the true value of monitoring and evaluation in a learning and development context' (SIRC, 2011, p19). However, findings in the research reports displayed large variations in local monitoring and evaluation practice. Assessments of such practices ranged from the 'generally satisfactory' in CSPs (Knight *et al.*, 2005) to being 'the weakest aspect of management' in the early stages of SSPs (OFSTED,

2004). Moreover, caveats regarding the accuracy of national findings in one evaluation of SSPs (Loughborough Partnership, 2006, p21) were actually attributed in part to weaknesses in schools' own collection of data on participation amongst ethnic minorities. As with other aspects of management, there was limited evidence in the research reports of the consequences of monitoring and evaluation practice. In this regard, it is notable that the Loughborough Partnership (2009, p16) identified that 'some [school] staff still perceived the primary value of evaluation as "demonstrating progress" in other words "proving" rather than "improving"'. Such a perspective supports existing perspectives in the literature suggestive of monitoring and evaluation as a mechanism of top-down regulation (Smith and Leech, 2011; Sam and Macris, 2014) rather than enabling local, contextually-sensitive learning to support bottom-up implementation.

Utilisation of Resources

The significant financial resources identified in the initial programme theory as being provided by the Labour government encompassed both capital and revenue funding, although the majority of research reports concerned initiatives in which resources were primarily directed towards the latter.

Some revenue funding was utilised to address specific barriers to participation associated with particular contexts. For example, contextually-orientated provision of transport to distant swimming pools or sports facilities in rural areas more generally was highlighted by OFSTED (2004). More

commonly, however, revenue funding was used to enhance human resource capacities that were regarded as important to young people's participation in sport. The importance of skilled coaches and other personnel to work with young people has long been recognised (Kremer, 1997; Bloyce and Smith, 2010) especially in the context of primary schools, where delivery of PE by generalist teachers was recognised as problematic as far back as the 1930s (Kirk, 2004). The availability of resources through SSPs was identified as addressing this problem through primary school teachers working more closely with specialist secondary school teachers (OFSTED, 2006). The importance of appropriate staff was also highlighted in community contexts where the employment of coaches from the estates where activities were delivered was identified as important to the attributed 'success' of the Street Games programme (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2004). More generally, a number of research reports identified that revenue funding was used by schools to hire external coaches to deliver particular sporting activities for pupils (Loughborough Partnership, 2006; OFSTED, 2006, 2009). While the programme theory was refined by evidence that external coaches were reported to have 'extended and enriched' provision (OFSTED, 2005, p4), this refinement was qualified by concerns about their level of expertise especially with respect to National Curriculum for PE (OFSTED, 2004; Loughborough Partnership, 2006).

Capital funding to support the construction of facilities for use by schools and communities was evaluated in respect of both the New Opportunities for PE and Sport (NOPES) (Loughborough Partnership, 2009) and Active England

(Hall Aitken, 2009) programmes. The provision of school sport facilities has long been a noted concern (Department of National Heritage, 1995, CCPR, 2001; Houlihan and Green, 2006) and NOPES facilities were found to have enhanced the range and quality of PE and sport provision at the school sites at which they were based as well as improving the motivation of pupils to participate (Loughborough Partnership, 2009). Similar impacts were also identified elsewhere in primary schools that had benefited from small capital funding for sporting equipment and resources (OFSTED, 2009). Both the Loughborough Partnership (2009) and Hall Aitken (2009) reports highlighted the importance of (revenue-based) programming within new facilities in order to increase participation in community contexts. Nonetheless, Active England projects that received only capital funding were found to attract more new participants to sporting activities, although revenue projects were 'more effective at attracting and keeping participants' (Hall Aitken, 2009, p34),

Development and Provision of Activities

A large proportion of the research reports examined issues related to the development and provision of activities. While rarely explicitly stated or explored in detail, there implicitly appeared an understanding in these research reports that improvements in sport and physical activities were, at least in part, a consequence of the provision and utilisation of additional resources. Such an analysis helps to develop the initial programme theory as does some of the further examination in this subsection of the contribution of

aspects of management to the development and provision of activities, where evidenced in research reports.

Across different contexts, and perhaps as a means of understanding local contexts, there was a common theme in a number of reports regarding the importance of consultation with young people, as has also been recognised elsewhere by Rees *et al.* (2006). For example, OFSTED (2009) cited as good practice those secondary schools that had taken into account the opinions of young people and provided them with the opportunity to choose pathways of activities in line with their interests. Similarly, the involvement of members of local communities in the design and planning for new facilities was identified as important to enhancing subsequent usage when facilities opened (Loughborough Partnership, 2009). However, the extent to which consultation was widely implemented across initiatives is unclear from the research reports. For example, despite all County Sport Partnerships involved in the Sport Unlimited programme being required to undertake consultation, it was reported that:

More time was needed to consult with young people before beginning activities - some [CSPs] put on activities which they *thought* would attract young people, rather than getting *evidence* that they would. (SIRC, 2011, p76, emphasis as in original).

In the same report, it was claimed that consultation was especially important for 'semi-sporty' young people who 'may be interested in a much narrower range of sports' (SIRC, 2011, p47).

The quantity and range of provision was a common theme across research reports, especially those concerned with initiatives delivered in school contexts. Different reports showed some increases in the time allocated to curricular PE, especially within primary schools (Loughborough Partnership, 2006, 2009; TNS-BMRB, 2010). OFSTED (2009) also indicated that the impetus given to PE and school sport by the government maintained its profile amongst school management. This profile was recognised as important if school timetables were to be reorganised to increase time for curricular PE (OFSTED, 2006). Pressures on primary school timetables have been identified as particularly challenging (Kirk, 2004) and some schools were delivering additional extra-curricular activities in order to reach the government targets for hours of participation in PE and school sport (OFSTED, 2004). Both within schools (Loughborough Partnership, 2006, 2009) and in community contexts (SIRC, 2011), increasing the available range of activities was considered important to engage young people, especially those considered 'semi-sporty' (SIRC, 2011). Previous research has similarly recommended that young people should be allowed to sample a range of sports in order to improve continued participation rates (Côté *et al.*, 2009). While exemplar case studies cited specific examples of new types of activities, in general broadening the range of activities to include individualised, non-competitive and non-traditional sports and physical

activities was considered to be effective (Loughborough Partnership, 2006; SIRC, 2011). Again, these findings reflect trends, evidence and recommendations also reported in academic literature (e.g. Coalter, 1999; Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011).

Similarly, a high proportion of the reports highlighted targeting of specific groups of participants, a common feature of sports development practice that can be traced back to the Action Sport programmes of the 1980s (Houlihan and White, 2002). Other than in the Sport Unlimited programme (SIRC, 2011), there appeared to be little specific targeting undertaken according to young people's levels of participation. Rather, targeting was typically undertaken on the basis of membership of societal groups that have been typically under-represented within sport. For example, research reports evidenced the work undertaken with girls (NRU, 2004), young people with a disability (SIRC, 2011) and certain ethnic and cultural groups (OFSTED, 2005; 2009). In terms of targeting groups within wider community contexts, it was also reported that sessions were often differentiated by age (NRU, 2004; Sport England, 2008). Targeted and small scale community sessions were found to be more successful in engaging particular groups of participants than open sessions (Sport England, 2008). The following section will consider further the extent to which participation outcomes were more broadly patterned according to the contextual characteristics of young people.

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The Contribution of Initiatives to Achieving Outcomes

It is noteworthy that almost all research reports presented largely positive overall assessments regarding the impact of specific initiatives. However, the purpose in this section is not solely to assess contribution of initiatives to patterned changes in participation (Pawson and Manzano-Santaella 2012). Rather, this section follows Pawson's (2006a) recommended process in which assessments of rigour of the evidence in research reports are conducted alongside the synthesis of this evidence. As such, the way in which participation outcomes were evaluated and the extent to which such evidence can contribute to understanding of the relationships between mechanisms, contexts and outcomes in the programme theory will be considered.

Measurement of young people's actual levels of participation was noticeably absent from almost all research reports. While objective measurement of physical activity amongst young people, for example through accelerometers, is increasingly common within academic studies (Griffiths *et al.*, 2013), such research methods were not identified in any of the reports. Only two research reports described utilisation of individualised, pre- and post-intervention, self-report measures of participation, of the kind advocated by Pawson and Manzano-Santaella (2012). In these two research reports, either methodological difficulties were recognised (SIRC, 2011) or the methodology was not fully discernible from the report (Sport England, 2008). However, both of these reports did indicate some improvements in

participation levels. The wider lack of specific measures of individual participation is perhaps explainable by the national scale of the research reports considered. Nevertheless, weaknesses in measuring participation appear to be a widespread and significant limitation in terms of the methodologies utilised.

In the six research reports in which there was some form of comprehensive, quantitative measure of impact (IYS, 2004; Loughborough Partnership, 2006, 2009; Hall Aitken, 2009; TNS-BMRB, 2010; SIRC, 2011), data were typically collected for some form of proxy for levels of participation. Longitudinal data was collected for each of these research reports at frequencies ranging from termly to yearly. There was no indication of any collection or comparison of data from control groups. Where data was collected from schools, measures typically included the number or proportion of pupils involved in curricular or extra-curricular activities within a defined period (IYS, 2004; Loughborough Partnership, 2006, 2009; TNS-BMRB, 2010; SIRC, 2011). In each of these reports, other than SIRC (2011), the government target regarding the proportion of pupils taking part in 2 hours of PE and school sport per week was measured and evidence demonstrated consistent increases from 2003 / 04 to 2009/10 in the proportion of pupils in each year group participating to this extent (TNS-BMRB, 2010). Despite the recognised importance of the issue, no attempts to measure the numbers of pupils proceeding to participate in external sport clubs were reported in any of the school-oriented reports. Research that concerned initiatives delivered outside of schools (Hall Aitken, 2009; SIRC, 2011) used similar measures of the numbers of

young people involved, 'throughput' in terms of number of repeat attendances and, in the case of Sport Unlimited, 'retention' which was conceptualised as attendance at more than 60% of sessions in a single term (SIRC, 2011). As in school-orientated research reports, data on these measures were largely represented positively with improvements recorded over time and specific targets for initiatives being largely met or exceeded (Hall Aitken, 2009; SIRC, 2011).

Inferential statistics were presented to different extents in each of these six reports. As one example of the limitations of analysis, the report on the apparently large-scale quantitative data set from Specialist Sports Colleges (IYS, 2004) contained no findings relating the contexts of schools to particular outcomes. In other reports, indicators of participation described in the previous paragraph were commonly differentiated according to gender, age, ethnicity and disability. Findings showed lower overall involvement amongst girls (TNS-BMRB, 2010; SIRC, 2011) although 'retention' was slightly higher amongst females in the Sport Unlimited programme (SIRC, 2011). Both in school (TNS-BMRB, 2010) and community initiatives and contexts (SIRC, 2011), involvement according to age typically appeared to peak amongst young people in school years 6 or 7 and then decline over the course of secondary school. These findings for both gender and age follow existing and previously reported patterns and, as such, it is difficult to draw inferences regarding widespread effective practice in the youth sport and physical activity initiatives that were examined. Findings reported on ethnicity or disability were insufficient across research reports to draw any

comparative judgements to support refinement of the programme theory. Only in the evaluation of Sport Unlimited was analysis of involvement by subgroups of 'non-sporty', 'semi-sporty' and 'sporty' young people reported and this indicated some success with the greatest proportion of young people 'retained' in the programme being classified as 'semi-sporty' (SIRC, 2011).

More detailed quantitative analysis in two reports may have more utility in identifying the influence of particular mechanisms and contexts on participation. Hall Aitken (2009) analysed indicators of participation for different types of project and according to the amount of funding received. Of potential relevance to future funding decisions, Hall Aitken (2009) concluded that 'smaller, focused projects are effective in targeting and reaching people from the target groups not engaged in physical activity' (p34), that 'outreach and outdoor projects attract significantly more participants for each £10,000 project cost' (p35) and that unsolicited projects, rather than those invited to apply by Sport England, attracted more participants relative to the cost of the project. From data collected in the national school sport survey, TNS-BMRB (2010) analysed the types of schools which reached different thresholds of participation in three hours of weekly PE and school sport. Correlations were reported in which schools located in areas of deprivation and that had greater proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals, from ethnic minorities and with special education needs were over represented in the category of lowest performing schools which had less than 40% of pupils reaching the three hours target (TNS-BMRB, 2010).

Beyond these solely quantitative examples, there were significant limitations across the broader set of research reports as to the extent that the influence of mechanisms and contexts could be inferred to have influenced participation. As stated earlier, very few research reports employed methodologies that gave prominence to data gathered specifically from young people which could have evidenced the influence of particular mechanisms on participation. Instead, in a number of reports, there appeared to be common assumptive logic, perhaps held by both stakeholders in initiatives and researchers, that improvements in the organisation and provision of sporting opportunities would result in enhanced participation. However, such aspects of programme theory were not made explicit or empirically examined in reports but rather were evident in isolated statements, such as the following two examples:

Pupils reaped most benefit through the school sport partnership links. Increased opportunity to experience new activities, initiated by school sport coordinators, has been one of the important outcomes for both primary and secondary school pupils. (OFSTED, 2009, p55)

Many interviewees reported that the wide range of activities was helping to engage young people who were previously disengaged from sport (Loughborough Partnership, 2009, p46)

In fact it was notable that, in relation specifically to gender in school contexts and based on significant quantitative data, TNS-BMRB (2010) questioned the link between opportunities and participation that appeared to underpin programme theories in a number of initiatives:

It is clear that despite having access to the same number and variety of sports, girls are slightly less likely than boys to participate in PE and sport. This is apparent – to a lesser or greater extent - in all of the survey measures. (p45)

Analysis, or even data, from different initiatives or in different contexts to refute, confirm or refine understanding of this aspect of programme theory was notable by its absence from the reports.

Conclusions

At the start of this article, the two research aims underpinning this study were introduced. This conclusion begins by considering the second aim, regarding the extent to which the synthesised research reports contribute to developing understanding of effective approaches to improving young people's participation in sport and physical activity. Pawson (2006b) indicates that in realist synthesis "'bad" research can yield "good" evidence' through a process of 'digging for nuggets'. While it would be unfair to brand the research reports in such extreme terms, significant limitations of the research reports can be identified. The lack of differentiation between contexts in the

research reports, other than generally between primary and secondary schools and amongst groups of participants, limited consideration of this aspect of programme theory. Moreover, the outcomes that were evaluated were commonly those associated with nationally or, more often, governmentally specified targets and indicators which often lacked specificity. As shall be further commented upon, this focus reflects the nature of evaluation as a political exercise (Coalter, 2011) in which the research reports were either commissioned or written by government or public sector agencies. However, the resultant limitations of research reports in identifying the complexities of patterns of youth sport participation only reflects the dominance of governance approaches which prioritise targets and indicators that can be readily measured (Adams and Harris, 2014). More generally, and in line with the generally positive appraisals offered in the reports, the dominant approach during the period of the Labour government appears to be one of 'adequacy evaluation' undertaken to 'provide all the reassurance necessary that the expected goals are being met and lead to continued support for the programme' (Habicht *et al.*, 1999, p12).

Habicht *et al.* (1999) also recognise that 'adequacy evaluations' typically fail to identify causal links between programme mechanisms and outcomes. Advocacy for adopting particular methodological approaches that may enable, albeit limited, attributions of causality has gained a certain prominence in sport policy literature (e.g. Coalter, 2011; Chen *et al.*, 2013) and such approaches have been utilised, for example, within evaluations of programmes that use sport to address wider social outcomes (e.g. Coalter,

2013b). However, the research reports considered in this synthesis tended to describe the implementation of data collection methods without demonstrating any consideration of broader research methodologies. The different status of organisations from academia, the public and private sectors as well as the differential resources accorded to research and evaluation of particular initiatives may have contributed to these methodological limitations and the largely descriptive nature of a number of the research reports. More generally, and perhaps somewhat unusually (Pawson, 2006a), aspects examined in the research reports were largely aligned with the governmental programme theory identified at the outset of the synthesis. In some cases considered earlier, there appeared to be an *a priori* acceptance of the importance of constituent elements of the governmental programme theory, such as partnership working, to achieving positive outcomes. This analysis again speaks to the influence of funders and, in the cases examined here, of government on programme evaluation (Greener and Greve, 2013). While the link between available evidence and the initially developed programme theory could be considered advantageous, in this case the constrained focus of the research reports limited identification of novel or innovative approaches to improving participation amongst young people that could have further contributed to enhancement of this programme theory.

These qualifications apart, the synthesis of research reports still contributed to the first research aim, that of developing understanding of the implementation of initiatives through a particularly significant period for youth

sport policy in the UK, an issue that has been previously under-researched. In this regard, using an initial programme theory which identified mechanisms through which initiatives were expected contribute to increasing participation helps to develop an account of 'causation in terms of the best available, best fit or best possible explanation of the available evidence' (Green 2014, p360). As such, if the initiatives considered in this study can be considered as having some impact on participation, at least according to the broad measures determined by government, then it is possible to identify some of the mechanisms that may have contributed to their success. Reflecting one of Nicholson *et al.*'s (2011) five recommendations for increasing sport participation, the scale of nationally provided financial resources appeared to address, to some extent, long recognised issues in the provision of sporting activities for young people. For some such issues, there appears to be some evidence to indicate the importance of making locally appropriate decisions regarding deployment of these resources. The successes in achieving nationally mandated targets, especially in school contexts, could also be taken as an indication of the influence of this particular, regulatory, policy tool (Houlihan and Lindsey, 2013), although the same conclusion cannot be drawn about governmental exhortations for enhanced monitoring and evaluation by those local stakeholders that were responsible for initiatives. While the national and local prioritisation of partnerships may have addressed long-term problems of fragmentation, conclusions regarding the effectiveness of this approach cannot be drawn given the limited evidence of participation in contexts beyond schools and other opportunities delivered by public sector organisations. Overall, it is

notable that none of these mechanisms can be considered as specific to increasing participation by young people in sport and physical activity.

Moreover, if one of the key purposes of realist synthesis is to delimit the extent to which initiatives are effective (Pawson, 2002), important conclusions can be drawn from the outcome patterns drawn from different research reports that indicate inequalities in participation remained resistant to change. Two recent reviews of academic literature (Evans and Davies, 2010; Green, 2014) have also questioned the impact of PE on long-standing inequalities of participation with Green (2014, p370) suggesting that 'where PE might make a difference seems likely to be restricted, for the most part, to those youngsters already predisposed toward sport and active recreation'. This study adds to Green's necessarily qualified conclusion through examining, to a greater extent, the mechanisms through which specific initiatives practically attempted to increase participation. In this regard, two important and connected points can be made regarding the limitations of these initiatives. First, despite the considerable policy impetus and new funding, approaches most commonly enacted during the period of Labour government, those of targeting under-represented groups and widening the range of activities, are that that have been similarly implemented in previous periods. The recognition, within the Active England programme, of the scarcity of 'radical innovation' (Hall Aitken, 2009, p49) appears to have been a more widespread problem. The lack of resultant progress on long-standing problems may therefore come as 'no surprise' (Sport England, 2008, p25). Second, the dominant approach to increasing participation appears, from the

research reports, to have been one primarily based on enhancing the supply of opportunities for sport and physical activity. Once again Hall Aitken (2009, p52) make a point with significant wider relevance: 'one of the great lessons from the Active England programme is that simply providing activities ... is not enough'. Importantly, this is supported by two reviews of academic evidence on youth sport and physical activity participation. Both Allender *et al.* (2006) and Rees *et al.* (2006) highlight that, while issues of provision may be amongst those that are most often identified and simply addressed, a more complex array of personal and social factors are important barriers and facilitators of young people's participation. Understanding personal and contextual 'triggers' of behaviour change (Pawson 2002) appeared, at best, to be only partially addressed through efforts at consultation with young people in some initiatives. Approaches that addressed long-recognised influences on young people's participation in community contexts, such as families (Timperio *et al.*, 2004; Haycock & Smith, 2012), were notable by their absence from the research reports and, it may be inferred, from initiatives themselves. As another example, there was also no mention of social marketing in the reports, although such techniques have subsequently been used to promote physical activity in the Change 4 Life programme that was instigated towards the end of the period of Labour government. As an overarching comment, a balancing of Nicholson *et al.*'s (2011) recommended prioritisation of supply with novel approaches to increasing demand may be appropriate to future efforts towards increasing young people's participation.

Such recommendations are important, as no realist synthesis would be complete without consideration of the potential of findings, and evidence more generally, to inform future youth sport policy and practice. In this regard, it is disappointing that one of the central conclusions of this synthesis regards the lack of innovation evident in both the delivery and evaluation of youth sport and physical activity initiatives. It could be suggested that the centralising tendencies of the Labour government stifled any such innovation (Phillipps, Grix & Quarmby, 2011). In contrast, decisions regarding spending of the Coalition government's recently restored funding for school sport have been, in line with current policy rhetoric, decentralised to the level of individual primary schools. While this synthesis would reinforced early evaluations suggest that this provision of School Sport Premium funding will likely have some positive, overall effect in the short term on young people's participation in sport, it is unlikely that the innovation that may be required to increase participation amongst habitually inactive young people will emerge when primary school head teachers have been placed in a more important role in determining local school sport policy and practice (Rainer *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, approaches favoured by the Labour government, such as partnerships and target setting, have largely been removed from the lexicon of youth sport policy by the Coalition government, despite some limited evidence of their effectiveness as policy tools. Such ideological changes in approaches to policy implementation as well as the significant battles within government with regard to the School Sport Premium only serve to reinforce Pawson's (2006a) own recognition of the greater influence of political decision making over unrealistic aspirations of truly evidence-based policy.

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ⁱ The PE, School Sport and Club Links strategy became known as the PE & Sport Strategy for Young People in 2008 with this transition being marked by commitment of further funding and some, relatively minor, modifications to targets and the strategy implementation.

ⁱⁱ Reference to 'research reports' is used here and throughout the article as an all-encompassing terminology inclusive of reports based on specific methodological approaches, such as monitoring and evaluation.

ⁱⁱⁱ The difficulties of providing detailed accounts of the complex methodological processes involved in realist synthesis within the confines of space that journal articles allow is frequently recognised in the literature (Rycroft-Malone et al. 2012; Pawson and Manzano-Santaella 2012; Wong et al. 2013). The authors would encourage anyone interested in specific aspects of methodology to contact them for further details.